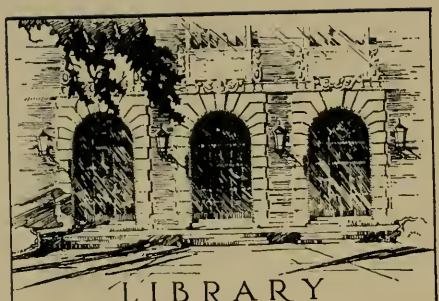

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THE CHURCH IN WALES.

A SPEECH

BY THE

RIGHT HON. W. E. GLADSTONE, M.P.,

IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS,

ON THE RESOLUTION OF

Mr. (now Mr. Justice) **WATKIN WILLIAMS.**

TENTH THOUSAND.

PRICE TWOPENCE.

LONDON:
THE CHURCH DEFENCE INSTITUTION,
9, BRIDGE STREET, WESTMINSTER, S.W.
1895.

The following are the circumstances under which this speech was delivered:

Mr. WATKIN WILLIAMS, M.P. for Denbigh, having moved "That in the opinion of this House, it is right that the Establishment of the Church and its union with the State should cease to exist in the Dominion and Principality of Wales,"

Mr. GLADSTONE, then Prime Minister, at once rose to reply, and after speeches from Mr. OSBORNE MORGAN in favour of the Resolution, and from Mr. SCOURFIELD against it, the House divided.

Ayes	45
Noes	209
Majority against the Resolution ...	164

The *Times* of the following day, May 25th, 1870, remarked—"What possible end could Mr. Watkin Williams have hoped to obtain by his researches into the early History of Christianity in the Principality? He must have foreseen that Mr. Gladstone knew much more about this subject than he. The Prime Minister absolutely revelled in the opportunity so rarely afforded him of discoursing upon a topic so nearly akin to his earliest and dearest studies. There was not a point on which Mr. Gladstone did not prove his knowledge superior to that of the mover of the Resolution."

SPEECH

OF THE

RIGHT HON. W. E. GLADSTONE, M.P.

Mr. GLADSTONE: I am sure that even those who may most widely differ from the opinions and the purposes of my hon. and learned friend, will be ready to admit that they have nothing to complain of in regard to the spirit and the language with which he has treated a very difficult and intricate subject. And indeed, by the candour of his admissions, he has opened and made ready a way for persons who either differ from him in principle, or who think, as he himself said, that the time and circumstances under which he makes his proposal would not justify the House in entertaining it with a practical view. My hon. and learned friend has entered into an historical discussion of great interest; but I am bound to say that, having been led to give some attention to this aspect of the subject, I am not able to read the history of Wales precisely in the same sense as my hon. and learned friend; and yet I do not think that, as far as my view varies from his, it is likely to offend him, because I am disposed to attach even much greater consequence to that unwise and unnational policy which was pursued for a great length of time by this country towards Wales, and of which Church appointments were unfortunately made the medium. But now let us look at the main questions which are raised. I cannot be surprised that my hon. and learned friend is struck—as, indeed, everybody must be struck—with the gravity of the facts which attach to the condition of the Church in Wales. There is, to a certain extent, a resemblance between the case of the Church in Wales and the case of the Church of Ireland; but that resemblance ought not to be exaggerated. Let us consider and endeavour to compare them with respect to numbers. My hon. and learned friend says the Churchmen of Wales may be reckoned at about one-sixth of the population. I believe, however, that the churchmen themselves, and those who write in the interests of the Church, are accustomed to claim about one-fourth of the population. But, whichever of these figures may be the nearer to the truth, no doubt the disproportion is very remarkable in the case of a Church purporting to be the

Church of the nation. It is not, indeed, at all in correspondence with the disproportion which prevailed in Ireland, because there one-ninth or one-tenth of the population was the utmost at which the members of the Established Church could be reckoned. There is one other point in regard to which the Welsh Church corresponds—I use the expression for the sake of convenience—with that of the Irish Church; it is that so large a proportion of her members belong to the upper classes of the community—the classes who are the most able to provide themselves with the ministrations of religion—and therefore in whose special and peculiar interest it is most difficult to make any effectual appeal for public resources and support. But, sir, with regard to other points of not less consequence, the case of the Welsh Church is certainly widely different from that of the Irish Church. In the first place, it is quite impossible to compare the severance between the Established Church and the Nonconformists of Wales with the severance between the members of the Irish Establishment and the Roman Catholics in that country. Not merely upon theological grounds, but also on the ground of actual sympathy or hostility of sentiment, the whole history of the case is entirely different. There was a strong and sharp antagonism between the Established Church and Roman Catholic Church running through Ireland, and that ecclesiastical antagonism was complicated and embittered by intermixture with political questions, even graver than the ecclesiastical controversies of the country; so that the effect of the whole was that the several portions of the population were placed almost in an attitude of standing social hostility to each other. Now, whatever view we take of the anomalies of the position of the Church in Wales, I am sure my hon. and learned friend will admit it would be a gross exaggeration to profess that anything like a resemblance of the general position exists as between Wales and Ireland, or in the attitude of the members of the Church in Wales, on the one hand, or the members of the Nonconforming bodies, on the other.

Again, the religious differences of Ireland had their root in the ancient history of the country. The religious differences which prevail in Wales are entirely modern. My honourable and learned friend, in the statistics which he has quoted from the year 1801, has marked that which is familiarly known to those who have considered the case of Wales, namely, that the growth of Dissent in that country has been not less recent than it has been rapid. Ever since 1801, which in questions of national history must be considered no very remote date, the figures

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quoted by my honourable and learned friend show that the position of the Church relatively to Nonconformity has greatly altered for the worse.* These things show that if, from any cause, the discussion of the question of the Irish Church has led to this early discussion of the case of the Church in Wales, still it would be a most precipitate and erroneous conclusion to assume that there was a substantial identity or similarity between them, even if we confine our views strictly to what is between the limits of Ireland, in the one case, and within the limits of Wales, in the other. With regard to the facts, there is no very great difference, perhaps, between my hon. and learned friend and myself, because the precise figures and precise proportions are not now at issue, and I own I think it creditable to the discernment and good sense of my hon. and learned friend that he regretted the want of accurate and trustworthy information to enable us to appreciate the real facts of the case as regards the several religious opinions in Wales. I know in some former years there have been sharp differences of opinion in this house in respect to the best mode of getting at these facts. Certainly we must feel that the absence of that information is a misfortune, and if it be possible to devise some methods of obtaining real and accurate information in this matter—methods attended with no practical difficulties, and not repugnant to the feelings of the people—an object of some importance will have been attained.

Now, sir, my hon. and learned friend says that the cause of Welsh dissent is the conviction of the people, founded upon the study of the Holy Scriptures, that there is no warrant in the Christian religion for the existence of national religious establishments. If my hon. and learned friend will permit me to say so, without intending him any disrespect, I must say that my hon. and learned friend has, in my opinion, entirely failed to prove that such is the case. Sufficient proof of what I say is to be found in this—that although it is true Welsh Nonconformity had taken root in the country, and had become the popular religion of the country somewhat more than half-a-century ago, my hon. and learned friend would have found it most difficult, if not absolutely impossible, at that time to discover the slightest traces of controversy with regard to religious establishments. It has not been a question with regard to national establishments of religion that has had anything to do with the growth of Welsh

* A reference to an Essay by Canon Bevan (Hay. J. Horden, 1881), and the Charge of the Bishop of St. Davids (Rivingtons, 1883), will show that in the past ten years, the tide has again turned, and the progress of the Church been very remarkable.

dissent. That is an historical challenge which I hold out to my hon. and learned friend. I am persuaded that he has fallen into an anachronism in what he has stated. My hon. and learned friend has indicated other causes as the growth of Welsh Dissent. But in my opinion, the cause is to be found in the cruel and irrational policy that was pursued, even for a longer period than has been stated by my hon. and learned friend, in regard to the ecclesiastical appointments in that country. As I understand the matter, the state of things before and after the period of the Revolution was this—the accession of the Tudor family to the Throne was the epoch at which the sun of royal favour began to shine upon Wales. The territory of Wales was defined, the laws of England were extended to Wales, and so far from quoting the case of the translation of the Scriptures into the Welsh tongue as an instance illustrating the unkind treatment which Wales has suffered at the hands of this country, I should rather feel inclined to quote it in support of an opposite argument. Whatever may have been the case in the time of Henry VIII., we have it on record that in the reign of Elizabeth—and contrast this treatment with that of Ireland—efforts, and effectual efforts, were made towards accomplishing the translation of the Scriptures into the Welsh language, and in the reign of James I. that work was satisfactorily accomplished. And here I may remark that I honoured the national feeling and courage of my hon. friend the Member for Merthyr Tydvil (Mr. Richard) when, some weeks ago, in the debate on the Education Bill, referring to the high esteem which Englishmen placed upon the English Bible he stated that he preferred the Welsh Bible, because it was finer, just in proportion as the Welsh tongue was finer than the tongue of this country. It was at this early period that that version with which, I am sorry to say, I have no acquaintance, was made, and what was the course that was pursued with regard to appointments in the Welsh Church? There is not a more curious fact in English history than this: there are but four sees in Wales, and yet, between the reign of Henry VIII. and the Revolution, no less than forty-four Welshmen were appointed to fill them. Not only, too, were the real Welsh sees occupied by Welshmen, but Welshmen overflowed into this country, and received preferment in England. That was the policy pursued in the reigns of the Tudors and Stuarts. And what was the consequence? Puritanism, which was strong in England, at that period, did not exist in Wales at all. It is a remarkable fact, as stated by Hallam, that Wales was one of the strongholds of the Church and of the Royal—or, as it afterwards became, the

Jacobite—party in the great struggle during the reign of Charles I. So far, then, it appears that so long as the sympathies of the nation were cultivated, the Church of Wales was perfectly acceptable to the people of Wales. And so matters continued till the Revolution. It is at that Revolution I would place the turning-point of Dissent. How many Welsh bishops have been made since the Revolution? Two.

Mr. WATKIN WILLIAMS: Yes.

Mr. GLADSTONE: Not more, certainly. But there was a complete change of policy in this respect. William III. looked on Welsh-speaking Welshmen just as he looked on Gaelic-speaking Highlanders, and Irish-speaking Irishmen, as no friends to him and his new political system, and one plan towards all was pursued. It was thought good policy and good statesmanship to place every office of weight and influence in Wales in the hands of those who, he fondly hoped, would Anglicise the country. That was the root of the misery. No doubt that the rise of Dissent in Wales was attributable to this cause; and, as my hon. and learned friend said truly, it was among the clergy of Wales themselves that the first indications of a religious movement opposed to the chief religious authorities of the country appeared. I believe in the picture my hon. and learned friend has drawn of the gross neglect, corruption, and nepotism—one cannot call it less than plunder—of the Church of Wales through a number of these Anglicising prelates. On that point I believe it is impossible to accuse my hon. and learned friend of any exaggeration; but it is a proposition completely sustained by history, that the people of Wales were the staunchest Churchmen in the country as long as their church was administered in the spirit of sympathy to their national feelings; whereas, there is little room left to doubt that Wales is that portion of the country where Dissent has the deepest root and firmest organisation, and claims the direct allegiance of the largest portion of the people. Whether that is to change or not I cannot say. My hon. and learned friend has done me no more than justice in his allusion to the part which I took in filling up a vacant Welsh see; and I can assure the House that it was with no political view that recommendation was made. That recommendation was made with a view to the religious interests of the country, and whether the cause of the Church of Wales is capable of being materially improved or not is a question which I have never asked myself. At any rate, I hope that the policy which has prevailed, more or less, for 30 years, and which, I trust, has been largely developed in the instances to which my hon. and learned friend has referred,

will be steadily adhered to, and that the Welsh Church will be administered in a spirit consonant with the feelings of the people, and characterised by a feeling of respect and sympathy for their usages and history.

My hon. and learned friend states that the Church of Wales is a complete separate Church; and here he comes to what I would call the difficult part of his case, because, except for the sake of truth and conventional purposes, there is really no Church in Wales. The Welsh sees are simply four sees held by the suffragans of the Archbishop of Canterbury, and form a portion of the province as much as any four English sees in that province. My hon. and learned friend says, and shows, that there was a time when the Welsh Church was a separate Church. No doubt that is perfectly true; but, at the same time, it is necessary to go back nearly 1,300 years for the purpose of proving that distinct and separate existence, and 1,300 years form a period in which the waves of time effectually efface any footprints that may have been made on the sands.

Mr. WATKIN WILLIAMS: Seven hundred years.

Mr. GLADSTONE: I think my hon. and learned friend does not wish me to enter upon the point of the real nature of the union which occurred at the time of St. Augustine?

Mr. WATKIN WILLIAMS: There was no union, even in form, until after the death of Griffith, the late Archbishop of Wales, in 1115, who was succeeded by Bernard, the lawyer.

Mr. GLADSTONE: I am willing to make my hon. and learned friend a present of those 600 years for the purpose of the present discussion, and to say that as regards the identity of these Churches, the whole system of known law, usage and history has made them completely one. My hon. and learned friend should reflect that it was not by the action of Rome that the whole of England was converted after the Saxon invasion. The history of Christianity has shown that a very large portion of England was converted not by the action of Roman missionaries, but from the North; and my hon. and learned friend might just as well set up the doctrine of a separate Church for the northern portion of England as for Wales. There is a complete ecclesiastical, constitutional, legal, and I may add—for every practical purpose—historical identity between the Church in Wales and the rest of the Church of England. After hearing the latter sentences of my hon. and learned friend's speech, I can hardly say for what he recommends us to vote; but he entertains the opinion that "it is right that the Establishment of the Church, and its union with the State should cease to exist in the said dominion

and principality of Wales." I will not say what it would be right to do, provided Wales was separated from England in the same way that Ireland is, and provided that the case of Wales stood in full and complete analogy to that of Ireland in regard to religious differences. But the direct contrary of this is the truth. I think, therefore, it is practically impossible to separate the case of Wales from that of England. That is not my assertion alone, it is evidently the belief of my hon. and learned friend himself. He has not said that we can disestablish the Church in Wales and leave the Church of England established. Nay, more, he has gone very far indeed towards saying the reverse, because he said :—

"It may be said, 'If you disestablish the Church in Wales you must, upon the same grounds, disestablish it also in Cornwall and Yorkshire;' and in answer to that I say, as a Welshman, 'Let Cornwall and Yorkshire look after themselves.' I will add that whenever those places wish to disestablish their Church they shall have my hearty support."

I am not making any unfair assumption, or endeavouring to entrap my hon. and learned friend into an admission that he does not intend to convey, when I say that the real question which he endeavoured to raise was the disestablishment of the Church of England. The candour of my hon. and learned friend is not less remarkable than the clearness with which he has treated the subject, and he has stated frankly and fairly that which, even if it had not been stated, would have been sufficiently obvious. We are not prepared to enter upon any crusade for that purpose. We do not think it our duty, in the first place, to endeavour to determine that question by any abstract arguments about national Establishments. If there are those who consider that national Establishments are opposed, under all circumstances, to the principle of the Christian religion, we do not belong to the number of such persons. It is our duty to look at the case of the Church of England as we find it. It is our duty to look at the facts and principles of the case, and to the feelings and convictions of the people with regard to it. In the first place, we are encountered at the threshold of the question by the old statistical controversy, with regard to which we seem to have been thus far rather too much in the condition of men who are determined to keep themselves in the dark; but we look to such communications as we have at our command, such as the returns of marriages in the country, for I take them to be a not unfair indication of the relative amount of strength of the religious communities in zealous, intelligent, and attached

members ; and it is their strength in that sort of vague adhesion which is all that in many cases a national Church is likely to command and to retain, which is one of the purposes for which it exists, I am bound to say my belief is that the Established Church of England is the religion of a considerable majority of the people of this country. I can only say that independently of that which appears to establish a good *prima facie* ground for remaining where we are, I do not envy my hon. and learned friend, or my hon. friend the Member for Merthyr Tydvil, or any other man who ventures to take in hand the business of disestablishing the Church of England. Even if it were as fit to be done as I think it unfit, there is a difficulty in the case before which the boldest man would recoil. It is all very well as long as we deal with abstract declarations put upon the Notice Paper of this House, of what might be done or ought to be done ; but only to go up to the walls and gates and look at the way in which stone is built upon stone, on the way in which the foundations have been dug, and the way they go down into the earth, and consider by what tools, what artillery you can bring that fabric to the ground. I know the difficulties, and I am not prepared in any shape or form to encourage—by dealing with my hon. and learned friend's motion in any way except the simple mode of negative—the creation of expectations which it would be most guilty, most unworthy, most dishonourable on our part to entertain, lest we should convey a virtual pledge. We cannot go in that direction ; we do not intend to do so ; we deprecate it, and we should regard it as a national mischief. Under these circumstances I hope the House will be prepared to meet with a negative the motion of my hon. and learned friend, and without the slightest reproach to him, or to those whom he represents, because we believe it is neither called for by the circumstances, nor agreeable to the desires and convictions of the people of this country.

Hansard's Debates, Vol. 201, pp. 1291–99, May 24th, 1870.

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